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Testimony of Congresswoman Carolyn B. Maloney
Before the New York City Council
Committee on Consumer Affairs
August 7, 2007

Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on this extremely important topic. I represent the area impacted by the steam pipe explosion. Unfortunately, rather than an isolated disaster, the steam pipe explosion could be a harbinger of worse problems to come. An aging system requires an enormous amount of maintenance; and even the best maintenance routine can break down, with disastrous results.

It is clear that something is greatly amiss at Con Edison for an accident of this magnitude to have taken place at the heart of midtown Manhattan. Unfortunately, with steam pipes that were installed during the Coolidge Administration, there is a growing likelihood of accidents.

The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that aging infrastructure nationwide requires a \$1.6 trillion investment over the next five years. While this total includes deteriorating bridges, tunnels, mass transit and other infrastructure needs, ASCE reports significant concerns with our energy grid. Tight budgets make it doubtful that anywhere near the required investment will actually be made. As a result, infrastructure failures such as this one and last year's power outage in my district in Western Queens are likely to result in lost lives, injuries, significant harm to businesses and great disruption to residents. As a city, we simply cannot afford annual disasters. The Daily News reports that the number of leaks from Con Edison's steam pipe system has been accelerating, and that last year there were eight steam leaks that caused roughly \$150,000 in damages. The News reports that five people were burned by steam vapor rising from manholes and valve boxes in 2006, up from three reported injuries in 2005. This is not a new phenomenon, however, and in fact the number of steam pipe explosions between 1986 and 1997 was reportedly higher than it was in the last decade, although July's explosion dwarfs all other incidents.

Con Edison has reported that it is spending \$20 million this year on upgrades to the steam system, and has been removing older components. In fact, the explosion reportedly occurred at a location in which Con Ed had reportedly had to do a fair amount of work in a short period of time. A leaking flange was repaired at 41st and Lexington on March 14; on March 23 an effort was made to repair an 8-inch pipe that was leaking; on June 10th, emergency repairs were made to the same pipe. On July 18th, the day of the explosion, reports indicate that a Con Ed crew visually inspected the manhole at Lexington and 41st for venting steam, and saw nothing

alarming. With the explosion occurring later that day, it is easy to wonder what those crews could have found if they had looked more carefully or more closely or in a slightly different area. I am hopeful that Con Edison can be encouraged to step up its maintenance and monitoring program.

Civil engineers say that new technology can detect corrosion or damage to steam pipes from within, without having to go through the expense and disruption of digging up the pipes. I understand that Con Edison has made an effort to adapt robotic probes to its steam lines. Unfortunately, reports indicate that the probes have not yet been designed to withstand the extreme heat inside the pipes. I understand that efforts have also been made to use ground penetrating radar, such as that used by the military to uncover land mines, or sound waves. There has also been an effort to develop a device that can listen for the sound of escaping steam. These are all interesting and useful experiments and Con Edison should be encouraged to expand its research to come up with a process that succeeds in monitoring pipes to identify potential concerns without excavation.

The cost of this disaster in human terms is incalculable, with one woman dead and several seriously injured. The financial losses are easily in the tens of millions of dollars. On July 20, 2007, I wrote to Governor Spitzer, urging him to ask the Small Business Administration (SBA) to provide federal disaster aid. Governor Spitzer, as well as Mayor Bloomberg, did so and I am delighted that the SBA agreed to provide help. The SBA currently has ten people stationed in the area, reaching out to businesses and providing low interest loans of up to \$1.5 million to help businesses recover. The City has also agreed to provide no interest loans of up to \$10,000. I am hopeful that Con Edison will ultimately agree to go beyond physical losses and will consider reimbursing businesses for business losses.

In sum, this disaster should serve as an impetus for the city and state governments to insist that Con Edison must do more to monitor and maintain an aging system. The initial investment may be significant, but given that another disaster could dwarf the magnitude of this one, the cost of doing nothing is intolerable.